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RR RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHMOS  
DE RUEHYE #0549/01 1071130  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 171130Z APR 06  
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2964  
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE  
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000549

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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, NEA/IR, AND NEA/ARPI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/18/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IR](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: IRANIAN-ARMENIAN SCIENCE UNIVERSITY EXPECTED TO OPEN IN YEREVAN

YEREVAN 00000549 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: DCM A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

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SUMMARY  
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**¶1.** (C) Iran's largest state-sponsored university -- with branches in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and correspondence courses on-line -- recently partnered with Yerevan State University (YSU) to establish a private "Armenian-Iranian Science University" in Yerevan, according to YSU's Caucasian Center for Iran Studies Director Garnik Asatrian. Classes at "Aria University" would start in September 2006 in Yerevan, Asatrian asserted, mainly funded by tuition (about USD 2000 each year) from the 300 Iranian graduate and doctoral students Asatrian expected to initially attract. Iranian, Armenian, and other academics from across the CIS will focus Aria's curriculum on international relations and political sciences, religion, oriental studies, renewable energy and ecology, and radio physics. Asatrian told us he had already been named rector of the university, had located facilities in Yerevan, but that he would not disclose the location and had not yet identified the source of financing for start-up expenses at the new university. End Summary.

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IRANIAN STUDIES CHAIR SLATED TO FORM NEW UNIVERSITY ...  
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**¶2.** (SBU) Dr. Garnik Asatrian, Director of the Caucasian Center for Iran Studies at Yerevan State University (YSU), announced April 10 that he had partnered with Iran's largest state-sponsored university "Payame Noor" (Herald of Light), to form the first "Iranian-Armenian scientific educational and cultural center." The establishment of Aria University "is a proud event that demonstrates the high level of interrelation between Armenia and Iran," Asatrian told the press. "I think Aria University will become a center for the concentration of scientific thought in the region," and an important tool to re-engage Armenia's "unemployed scientific cadre," Asatrian said.

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... THOUGH SOURCE OF FUNDING REMAINS UNCLEAR  
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**¶3.** (C) On April 14, Asatrian told us that Payame Noor University (Iran's "largest state-sponsored university" with regional campuses throughout Iran, branches in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and correspondence courses on-line) would

furnish professors and students to Aria University. Asatrian said, however, that he would not seek Iranian funding as he wanted to "avoid politics." Asatrian also claimed he would refuse private Armenian funding sources for the same reason, but noted that several "wealthy businessmen" including Hrant Vardanian, the founder of the Grand Holding empire (candy, tobacco, and light bulbs), had expressed interest in investing in the private university. "At this point," Vardanian had only provided "moral, not financial" support, Asatrian said. Asatrian evaded questions about the source of funding for start-up operations, noting only that he "could take care of it."

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GETTING STARTED: IRANIAN-ARMENIAN EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP  
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¶ 14. (C) Asatrian asserted that he could rent campus facilities, finance start-up university operations, and attract graduate and doctoral level students in time to open Aria by September 2006. A network of Asatrian's former YSU Iranian Studies Department students now teaching in undergraduate universities across Iran (including Payame Noor), Asatrian claimed, would serve as his main recruiters. "No one is idle in Iran, every family looks to send children to university; it doesn't matter where," Asatrian said. "The average cost of higher education in Iran is about USD 3000 annually, we can charge USD 2000 here, which would make Aria University competitive," Asatrian said. (Note: Payame Noor University's website claims the university, which is a registered "legal body under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology," "enrolled about 431,840 students in 59 degree programs at 257 study centers. Asatrian said he would have no problem recruiting 300 graduate and doctoral level students from this population for studies at Aria. End Note.)

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YEREVAN 00000549 002.2 OF 002

HIGHER ED NEGLECTED IN ARMENIA? IRAN FILLING THE VOID?  
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¶ 15. (C) "Not a single country, not even America, has invested in higher education in Armenia," Asatrian claimed. Well-educated and under-utilized, Armenian scientists are "living in poverty," while the rest of the world "stands idle" ignoring our problems here, he asserted. (Comment: Asatrian's assertions are incorrect and we challenged; private and public US sources have generously supported programs in Armenia at all levels of education. It is striking that Asatrian could make such allegations on the one hand and admit that his son is a scholarship recipient currently attending Yale University on the other. End Comment.) When asked what Armenians were doing to improve the condition of higher education in their own country, Asatrian responded that he had partnered with Payame Noor to "give Armenia another chance."

¶ 16. (SBU) Asatrian said he foresees Iranian, Armenian, and other academics from across the CIS focusing Aria's curriculum on international relations and political sciences, religion, oriental studies, renewable energy and ecology, and radio physics. Studies in sciences would be of "a theoretical nature" only, "without expensive laboratory experimentation," he said.

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COMMENT: ASATRIAN HAS WILL, SKILL TO ESTABLISH UNIVERSITY  
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¶ 17. (C) It is very likely that the Iran-Armenia University will open for classes in September as Asatrian claims. A benchmark step in the continuing Iran-Armenia courtship, Aria University could provide a new venue for exchange (this time cultural, scientific and educational), beyond traditional

Armenia-Iran energy and economic relations.  
EVANS